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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of nontraditional satisfactory/unsatisfactory (or pass/fail) grading on graduate admissions and on financial award decisions by surveying each department offering graduate programs at the State University of New York at Albany. Some differential effects of the nontraditional versus traditional grades were found and are summarized. Some data are displayed in tabular form. (MSE)

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EFFECT OF UNDERGRADUATE S/U TYPE GRADES ON GRADUATE ADMISSIONS AND ON FINANCIAL AWARD DECISIONS

To examine the effects of Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory (S/U) or Pass/Fail (P/F) grading on graduate admissions decisions, most studies have surveyed graduate schools and graduate school deans rather than individual departments. Moreover several writers have examined the effects of S/U type grades on graduate admission decisions, but few have studied the effects of such grades on decisions for awarding an assistantship or fellowship. In his research summary, Warren (1971) states that "The possible loss of fellowships as a result of presenting transcripts having no grades other than passes may be a more serious consequence of pass-fail grading than failure to get admitted to a graduate school."

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of S/U (non-traditional) grading on graduate admissions and on financial award decisions by surveying each department offering graduate programs at SUNY Albany.

Many findings suggest S/U or P/F grading systems for undergraduates should be introduced with caution at colleges where students indicate a desire to enter graduate or professional schools. For example, S/U grades on a student's transcript reduce the likelihood of admission to some medical schools. Howells (1970) surveyed 102 U.S. and Canadian medical schools and received responses from 78. The responses were classified as follows: Positive (5 institutions), generally negative--cautious with some reservations (36 medical schools), negative (15schools), and very negative (16).

The University of California at Santa Cruz reported that since opening in 1965, students have been graded Pass/Fail with written evaluations except

"...in non-introductory courses in biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics. Justification for the letter grade option is that the admissions policies of some graduate and professional schools operate to the disadvantage of students with no letter grades".

Similarly, some students with S/U grades may experience difficulty with admission to law school. The Association of American Law Schools endorsed a statement by the Law Schools Admission Test Council (1970). The statement made clear that increasing reliance would have to be placed on the results of the Law Schools Admission Test as the proportion of a student's S/U grades were increased. In a letter to a SUNY Albany undergraduate student, the Dean of Students at the Law School of the University of Chicago stated, "My advice to you is that you avoid taking a large number of courses pass-fail if you can avoid doing so." (Bosen, 1971).

Also, admission to many graduate schools may be hampered by S/U grading. Hassler's (1969) survey of the nation's graduate school deans indicates a widespread reluctance to trust "pass-fail" grading when judging transcripts of student applicants. Asked if they would prefer to evaluate a student for admission to the graduate school or professional school on the basis of a letter graded transcript, or one designated with pass-fail evaluations, the deans voted 214 to 7 for the letter grades.

Antioch College seniors have indicated some difficulty with graduate school admissions with Antioch's credit/written-evaluation system of grading in effect since 1968. Sparks and Churchhill (1971) report, "Of those who had already applied for graduate school, 43% said they had experienced 'considerable' or 'some' difficulty explaining the meaning of their Antioch records to those schools; 24% has experienced little or no difficulty; and 33% said they did not yet know if they would."

Rossman (1970) examined the effect of S/U grades on admission and received responses from 30 graduate schools and 15 professional schools. Responses fell along a continuum from positive to negative but the negative comments were sufficient to suggest that "undergraduate colleges and universities should seriously consider the consequence before expanding the use of this grading system".

Another study by Howells (1971) selected four fields and sent letters to the department chairmen at selected graduate schools in each of those fields. Responses were received from schools and departments of education at 5 universities, departments of English at 6 universities, departments of mathematics at 6 universities, and departments of psychology at 7. Each department received a description of SUNY Albany's undergraduate grading system, (which mandates S/U grades for all freshmen and sophomores) and was asked to comment on the effects of such grading on the student's chances for admission and for a financial award. Concerning admission, 9 responses were classified as positive, 8 were classified as positive with reservations, 5 as negative with reservations and 2 as negative. Concerning a financial award, 7 departments' responses were classified as positive, 5 as positive with reservations, 3 as negative with reservations and 3 as negative, with 6 not commenting. Howells concludes that when S/U grades are limited to the freshman and sophomore years, an Albany student's chances for admission and financial award will not be seriously jeopardized at most schools in these 4 fields. The greatest weight is placed on grades earned during the junior and senior years.

The research reported here attempts to determine what proportion of S/U grades overall and in the student's major tends to have a positive or negative effect on admissions and financial award decisions. During the Fall Semester 1971 a questionnaire was sent to each academic department offering graduate degree programs at SUNY Albany with 42 responding and 4 not responding.

The questionnaire asked departments to respond to a series of Likert-type opinion questions on the basis of these assumptions:

(a) The term "S/U is used to describe all "non-traditional" grades including Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory, Pass/Fail, Credit/Non-credit, etc.

(b) The department's admissions and financial awards decisions for masters and doctoral study are distinct (departments were asked to differentiate their responses for applicants to each different program).

(c) The applicant has no previous graduate study; that is, his undergraduate grades are the only grades on which to base an admission/financial award decision.

Some questions focused on the factors which are weighed in each admission/financial-award decision while others asked about the effects of certain proportions of S/U grades on these decisions. Some department chairmen answered the questionnaire directly but most either referred the questionnaire to the committee chairmen responsible for admissions and/or financial award recommendations or conferred with them before responding.

Of the 42 responding departments, 10 submitted comments in lieu of responses to the Likert-type questions about the effects of S/U grades on admission/financial award decisions. None of these comments could be classified as positive, but 7 were neutral. Three were negative (See Appendix A).

A total of 32 departments returned useable responses to the Likert-type questions. These departments offer 40 distinct masters programs and 20 doctoral programs. Seven of these departments submitted substantial comments in addition to their responses and all of these comments were classified as negative (See Appendix B). Since not every department answered every item completely, the response totals in Tables 1-4 does not always equal 60.

TABLE 1

The Number of Departments Ranking Each Credential First or Second in Importance in Admission Decisions and in Assistantship/Fellowship Decisions

Type of Credential	Importance in the Admission Decision		Importance in the Assistantship/Fellowship Decision	
	No. Ranked First	No. Ranked First or Second	No. Ranked First	No. Ranked First or Second
Grades in Major	21	33	15	32
Overall Grades	16	23	2	5
Standardized Tests	5	23	2	9
Recommendation Letters	10	25	14	10
Quality of the Undergraduate School	1	2	1	1
Financial Need	N.A.	N.A.	10	18
Other	4	8	9	17

FINDINGS:

1. For the respondents as a whole, S/U grades have the same impact on applitions for masters degree study as they do on applications for doctoral study.

   Departments were asked to differentiate between masters and doctoral admissions/financial-award decisions. Naturally there were some differences within and among departments, but these differences were so slight and irregular that no generalizations could be made in comparing the effects of S/U grades on doctoral versus masters deliberations. Therefore, Tables 1-4 combine the data for both masters and doctoral programs.

2. Likewise there are few differences between programs in arts and sciences versus programs in the professional schools. S/U grades effect admission/financial-award decisions similarly whether the graduate program is oriented toward training practitioners (such as in education, business, library science, social welfare, and public administration) or not. The irregularity of the data justify no generalizations in this area.

3. The most important factor in both the admission and the financial award decision is the grades earned in the students undergraduate major. Departments were asked to rank the importance of a number of factors in these decisions and Table 1 shows that the first or second ranked credential in the admissions decision was most often grades in the major followed by overall grades, and recommendation letters. The most important factors in the financial award decision are grades in the major followed by recommendation letters. The high importance of reference letters is surprising since such letters are widely acknowledged to be rather uncritical.

4. As the proportion of S/U grades increases on a student's transcript, departments rely most heavily on a standardized test score in making

TABLE 2

The Percent of Departments Indicating the Effects of S/U Grades on the Admission Decision
(N = 60)

% S/U Grades		S/U Effect on Admissions Decisions				
		Very Positive Effect %	Positive Effect %	No Effect %	Negative Effect %	Very Negative Effect %
10% or Under	Overall Grades	7	--	93	--	--
	Grades in Major	3	2	62	30	3
25%	Overall Grades			62	33	3
	Grades in Major			45	33	22
33%	Overall Grades			43	43	13
	Grades in Major			23	43	33
50%	Overall Grades			15	60	25
	Grades in Major			10	43	47
67%	Overall Grades			3	42	55
	Grades in Major			--	27	73
75%	Overall Grades			--	28	72
	Grades in Major			--	27	73
90% or Over	Overall Grades			--	22	78
	Grades in Major			--	20	80

TABLE 3

The Percent of Departments Indicating the Effects of S/U Grades on the Decision to Award an Assistantship/Fellowship
(N=54)

% S/U Grades		S/U Effect on Decision to Award Assistantship/Fellowship				
		Very Positive Effect %	Positive Effect %	No Effect %	Negative Effect %	Very Negative Effect %
10% or Under	Overall Grades	4	0	91	6	0
	Grades in Major	4	0	70	24	4
25%	Overall Grades			63	31	6
	Grades in Major			50	19	31
33%	Overall Grades			44	33	22
	Grades in Major			28	30	42
50%	Overall Grades			24	44	31
	Grades in Major			13	35	52
67%	Overall Grades			7	37	56
	Grades in Major			4	31	65
75%	Overall Grades			4	26	70
	Grades in Major			4	26	70
90% or Over	Overall Grades			4	22	74
	Grades in Major			4	26	70

an admission decision, and on the recommendation letters in making a financial award decision.

Presented with an increasing number of S/U grades on the transcript, responding departments place increasing importance in their admissions deliberations on standardized test scores: 86% of the programs indicate that they would rely more heavily on test scores. The next greatest weight is placed upon recommendation letters and on the quality of the undergraduate school, with 66% and 62% respectively, of the respondents indicating that these factors would take on greater importance.

With an increasing number of S/U grades on the transcript, the same three factors become dominant in the financial award decision, but reference letters assume the most importance (83%) followed by test scores (80%) and quality of the undergraduate school (71%).

5. More than 25% of S/U grades on an applicant's transcript is likely to have a negative effect on the admission decision, and S/U grades in the major are even more likely to have a detrimental effect.

Table 2 shows the percent of programs which indicate the effect of each proportion of S/U grades on a hypothetical transcript. In most responding departments more than 25% of S/U grades (either in the major or overall) has a negative effect on the decision. Only 25% of S/U grades in the major causes 55% of the departments to respond negatively or very negatively, and when a third of grades in the major are S/U, 76% respond negatively or very negatively. Regarding overall grades, 62% of departments indicate that 25% S/U has no effect, but as much as 33% S/U has 56% of departments reacting negatively.

6. However, when S/U grades are limited to the first two years of undergraduate study, the majority of programs indicate that such grades have no effect on the admission decision.

53% of the programs in Table 4 stated that complete S/U grades in the freshman and sophomore years would have no effect on the decision and 47% indicated a negative effect. Nearly every department saw a negative effect when presented with total S/U grades for the freshmen, sophomore and junior years, or for all four years.

TABLE 4

The Percent of Departments Indicating the Effects of S/U Grades on Admission Decisions and on Assistantship/Fellowship Decisions When These Grades are Limited to Given Years of Undergraduate Study

S/U Effect on Admissions and Financial Aid Decisions When Limited to Years		Very Positive Effect %	Positive Effect %	No Effect %	Negative Effect %	Very Negative Effect %
Freshman Year Only	Admission (N=60)			83	17	
	Financial Award (N=54)			85	15	
Freshman and Sophomore Years Only	Admission (N=60)			53	37	10
	Financial Award (N=54)			46	50	4
Freshman, Sophomore and Junior Years Only	Admission (N=60)			3	35	63
	Financial Award (N=54)			5	48	46
All Four Years	Admission (N=60)			3	15	83
	Financial Award (N=54)			4	20	76

7. More than 25% of S/U grades on an applicant's transcript is likely to have a negative effect on the financial award decision, and S/U grades in the major are even more likely to have a detrimental effect.

In most departments in Table 3, more than 25% of S/U grades has a negative effect on the decision to award an Assistantship or Fellowship. Whereas, only 25% of S/U grades overall causes 37% of the departments to react negatively, 33% S/U grades overall causes 55% of the departments to respond negatively. S/U grades in the major are even more detrimental since 50% respond negatively to 25% S/U grades and 72% respond negatively to 33% S/U.

8. When the first two years of undergraduate study are graded S/U, almost half the programs indicate that such grades have no effect on the financial award decision, but 54% indicate a negative effect.

While 85% of the programs in Table 4 think S/U would have no effect on the award decision if S/U were the only freshman grades, this figure shrinks to 46% if all freshmen and sophomore grades are S/U and to 5% if all freshman, sophomore and junior grades are S/U. These findings are a bit more negative than those by Howells(1971) probably due to the larger number of fields represented and to the use of a Likert-type response scale instead of judges' ratings of written statements.

9. For the respondents as a whole, S/U grades have about the same effect on admissions decisions as on financial award decisions. In other words, S/U grades do not have a significantly greater negative effect on financial award decisions.

A comparison of data in Tables 2 and 3 shows that the responding departments as a group rate the effects of S/U grading almost the same for admissions as for financial award deliberations. Even when all students are graded completely S/U during given undergraduate years (see Table 4), the effects on the two types of decisions are not very different.

However, S/U grades do tend to have a more negative effect on the financial award decision than on the admission decision, but only in those departments and programs which place a high importance on grades in making this decision. An examination of the questionnaires and conversations with some departments revealed that many of the 18 departments rating financial need as the first or second most important factor in making an award also indicated that S/U grades

have little effect on this decision. Moreover, some programs, particularly in the natural sciences, support nearly every student with an assistantship or fellowship from either university or external sources so the impact of S/U grades is felt in the admission rather than the financial award decision (see comment 7 in Appendix 2).

IMPLICATIONS:

In general most applicants to most graduate programs at SUNY albany would be well-advised to limit the number of S/U type courses to less than 25% overall and to the freshmen and sophmore years if possible. S/U, P/F , or credit/non-credit grades in the student's major field or in the intended field of graduate study are particularly damaging in a competitive admissions situation. Moreover, such grades are likely to have a negative effect on the assistantship/fellowship decision in those departments where grades play an important role in the decision. Once a student gains admission, however, the financial award decision may not be influenced negatively by S/U grades in those programs (a) which place high importance on financial need in making an award, or (b) which support nearly all full-time graduate students.

When all freshman and sophomore courses are graded S/U, a dilemma is often created because admission/financial-award decisions in most cases must be made on the basis of two or three semesters of letter-graded courses. The validity of such a limited number of graded courses is often questioned. An admissions committee experiences little difficulty in acting on the very best applicants (who present high test scores and excellent references to go along with their S/U grades) and on the very worst applicants. It is the 70% or 80% in the middle who present S/U grades that impede reaching the fairest possible decision.

S/U grades may well have the most detrimental effect on the achievement oriented student who earns good grades through hard work -- a quality which does not always appear in a test score but which is a necessary concomitant of success in graduate study.

Applicants from undergraduate institutions of medium and low quality will probably have their transcripts judged more harshly than applicants from schools regarded highly. All other things being equal, a departmental admissions committee will tend to interpret a "P" or"S" as a "C";and a "C" from Princeton or Swarthmore is not the same as a "C" from schools at the middle or end of the academic procession. Undergraduate Colleges not blessed with a reputation for high admissions standards and academic rigor would be ill-advised to proliferate S/U type grades sincetheir graduate school bound students would be harmed.

It is probable that the above data and conclusions can be generalized to many other graduate schools and universities. SUNY Albany is now a reasonably well-developed university center with 4,500 graduate students. It has many fine programs and many others developing in that direction. The size, quality, and diversity of the graduate programs in its seven schools and colleges are comparable to those in many public and private universities across the country.

On the other hand, SUNY Albany does have an S/U grading policy for all freshmen and sophomores, and sympathy with such grading is probably greater at Albany than at universities without such grading. For one thing, Albany's S/U policy could not have been proposed and implemented without considerable faculty support. Judgements about the effects of S/U grading on graduate admission/financial-award decisions, then, may be less harsh at SUNY Albany than at most other universities. Even so, roughly half the respondents indicated negative effects from a grading system similar to Albany's (see Table 4).

In any case the spreading use of S/U type grades in undergraduate study is certain to force more departments to require a test score from their applicants. The pressures for increasing reliance on test scores come ironically at a time when many nationally administered examinations are under attack for being too narrow and culturally biased. This dilemma in graduate admissions must be resolved unless the concept of "open admissions" or even admission by lottery spreads to graduate study. These are not likely possibilities, however, in view of the financial constraints facing higher education and in view of the educational philosophy and rationale underlying most of graduate education in the United States.

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Appendix 1

Comments Submitted in Lieu of Responses to the Likert-Type Questions About the Effects of S/U Grading on Graduate Admissions and Assistantship/Fellowship Decisions

1. The effect of S/U grades on the evaluation of applications for admission or financial aid cannot be simply measured. A large, or even an appreciable, number of S's on an applicant's record simultaneously makes the process of evaluation more difficult and produces an incalculable effect on the applicant's chances of success. As the record of grades becomes less important as evidence of past performance or promise of future success, other perhaps less reliable or less easily interpreted indices become proportionately more important: letters of recommendation, standardized tests, and the student's own statement of his objectives. Presumably this shift will help some applicants' chances and hurt others', but in either case it makes the task of evaluation more difficult.

2. The effect of increasing the proportion of S/U grades in a record is one of decreasing the amount of information which is provided by these indices concerning an applicant's academic performance. A major consequence of this would be to give more weight to the other criteria employed in admission and fellow-assistantship decisions. This, in turn, may make the evaluation process more difficult as these criteria may have to be assigned different weights, depending on the circumstances. Thus, if an applicant had attended a well known institution of excellent repute, had obtained satisfactory standardized test scores, and provided letters of recommendation from individuals who were thoroughly acquainted with his/her academic performance and who provided a candid evaluation of it, the effects of S/U grades in the transcript would be minimal. In other circumstances, the evaluation of an applicant's credentials would be more difficult, and the effect of an increasing proportion of S/U grades might be to increase the likelihood of rejection of an application. The effect of S/U grades in the freshmen and sophomore is probably less than in the junior and senior years, although changes in the quality of performance over the college career are also of interest in evaluation of applications for admission and for fellowships and assistants.

3. This department has no experience with S/U or pass/fail grades for applicants and we are unwilling to speculate about the effects which such grades might have on admissions and financial award decisions. (This or a similar comment was submitted by five departments.)

4. It is my opinion that S/U grades should be restricted to a few courses (three or four) during the undergraduate years and only special courses at the graduate level should be graded this way.

5. All credentials (in the admission folder) are considered significant and important and all are considered seriously to provide a comprehensive view (of the applicant). However, we regret very much the abandonment of grade designations which leads us to depend increasingly on the GRE and other tests about which we are less than confident.

6. We have reviewed few, if any, transcripts which were based on S/U or P/F systems. Therefore, specific responses to the above questions cannot be given honestly and accurately. In this regard we consider ourselves fortunate not to have been forced to face the obvious problem. As indicated above, we place great importance on grade point average and would be seriously hampered in our evaluations by the absence of letter or numerical grades. I feel certain that we would tend to by-pass students having S/U grades in favor of those whose credentials more readily lend themselves to interpretation.

Appendix 2

Comments Submitted in Addition to Responses to Likert-Type Questions About the Effects of S/U Grading on Graduate Admissions and Assistantship/Fellowship Decisions

1. In general I believe that although S/U grading may have some validity in special courses, as a general practice it is inappropriate to serious academic study.

2. My impression is that there is much less S/U, pass/fail grading than the noise would lead one to expect. The limited use of S/U by students makes little or no difference. In processing admissions we will not bother with those who present all or a substantial amount of S/U. The pool of those who can present evidence of ability is too large.

3. For programs in (this department) the questionnaire comes about five years too soon, for we seldom screen an individual less than 28 years of age. For the (master's program), our procedures seem to be concerned with screening out those individuals who are not likely to profit from (the doctoral) program, a less than positive comment, but a truthful one, I think.

4. The answers (to the questions) are a reflection of the shifts (in importance of the factors in the decision) which occurs with the absence of letter grades. An increasing proportion of letter grades produces the negative effect which (might or might not be) counteracted by the increasing importance of (standardized tests, letters of recommendation, and the quality of the undergraduate school).

5. We have had almost no applicants up to the present time presenting records with S/U grading. I hope this will continue to be the case for I feel that S/U grading is a mistake.

6. The effect of S/U grades on consideration of graduate applications is that we have one less basis (and an important one) for evaluation. This inevitably increases the significance of the remaining credentials. Potentially, it would place far too much weight on GRE scores.

7. S/U grades have virtually no effect on fellowship and assistantship award decisions (in this department), but only because every graduate student in this department receives financial support. Generally we will not admit students who have S/U grades in any courses except athletics and arts and crafts. Pass/fail transcripts are essentially worthless for judgments about graduate student admissions. This is a very complex business and for some applicants transcripts are more important factors in the decision whereas for other students test scores or reference letters are more important. What we need is a means of ranking (the applicants) - this is only provided by grades, either numerical or letter.

8. The pseudo-objectivity in reporting such subjective considerations as ranking percentages and importance of the criteria is fully recognized. In general, our experience with S/U grading has been limited, and we hope it will continue to be so. In particular, the Department desires letter grades in the major field and also in the minor, especially if it be a foreign language.

9. We are willing to accept S/U grades for the first two years of college work and we think a higher percentage would have a detrimental effect on admission.